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The NSC's Iranian adventure

LET us separate the different elements in the remarkable affair of the hostages: the delivery of American weapons to Iran, and White House operations.

Taken all by itself, the matter of delivering American weapons (mostly spare parts) to Iran has some merit, provided it could be done without compromising American neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war or causing or permitting Iran to win the war.

Iran is the most populous and potentially powerful country on the Gulf. It has 43 million people. Next largest is Iraq at 15 million. Saudi Arabia has between 10 and 12 million.

It is in the long-term interests of the United States to be on normal and friendly terms with Iran. The only reason the US is not on such terms is that it backed the old regime of the Shah against the present regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. The present regime represents the support formerly given its downfallen enemy. The taking of American embassy personnel as hostages by the Khomeini regime reflected that resentment and makes return to normal relations difficult.

Someday the break is going to be repaired and normal relations resumed. The sooner the better.

And there is nothing inherently wrong in inviting the help of the government of Iran for obtaining the release of the Americans being held in captivity somewhere, we presume, in Lebanon or Syria.

But to pay for that release by sending weapons is a clear and flagrant violation of President Reagan's often repeated declaration that he will never "reward" terrorism.

Had Mr. Reagan never announced a policy of never dealing with "terrorists," and never lectured other countries, most recently France, for doing just that, the deal of arms for hostages would not have been unusual in international relations. Similar deals have been done down through the ages. The United States has done it many times, from the days when it used to ransom American sailors from the Barbary "pirates."

The US went to war against those Barbary pirates only after said "pirates" began charging more for American sailors than for sailors of other nationalities.

It may be ignominious for a great nation to ransom its people who have been seized for such purposes, but it is not unusual. To repair broken relations with Iran and get our hostages back at the same time could have been presented as a splendid double success, were it not for Mr. Reagan's own loudly proclaimed abhorrence of such arrangements.

But then we come to a third aspect of this remarkable matter. We are informed that the affair was not managed through the Central Intelligence Agency, which has been licensed to do such things, but managed directly by members of the staff of the National Security Council at the White House.

Here we come to an administrative issue. A president is in charge of national policy and in charge of the armed forces. But his policies are normally executed through the official departments of government.

There could be no legal problem in Washington if the affair had been handled either by the State or Defense Departments or by the CIA. All three are duly licensed by the Congress and under congressional supervision. But the staff of the NSC has no operating license and is not under the supervision of the Congress. I am informed by a long-term former member of the NSC staff that such operations were never conducted by anyone on the NSC staff until the Reagan administration. This is novel administrative procedure.

Add that the NSC staff is not set up for operations. It is strictly a policymaking organization. Its competence to handle clandestine operations is well identified by the misfortunes of Eugene Hasenfus in Nicaragua and the blowing of the arms deal with Iran. The NSC staff is simply not competent to run operations like this.

Now there will have to be a congressional investigation. Mr. Reagan is exposed as violating his own principles. Iraq will think that the US is taking sides with Iran in their war. And should the US be using Israel in an operation that violates an official policy of sending no US arms to Iran, a policy laid down by former President Carter and so far supposedly honored by Mr. Reagan?

It is a foreign policy fiasco.